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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SCE, EUR/PPD; NSC FOR BRAUN; OSD FOR
POPOVICH

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SUBJECT: LARGE CROATIAN SERB GATHERING GOES SMOOTHLY, UNTIL
VISITING RS PM DODIK OPENS HIS MOUTH

REF: ZAGREB 404

Classified By: Rick Holtzapple, POL/ECON, Reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (U) On May 30, the Serbian National Council (SNV) of Croatia convened the largest political gathering of Serbs in Croatia since independence, assembling some 1800 delegates from Serb minority councils across Croatia in Zagreb's main concert hall. The objective of the assembly, according to conference organizer and SNV President Milorad Pupovac, and as reflected in a statement adopted at the session, was to establish the SNV as a more effective political voice for the Croatian Serb community, and to bring an end to what Pupovac described as the "ghettoization" of Serbs within Croatia. The Assembly's statement detailed a familiar list of important concerns for Croatia's Serbs, including voting rights, housing accommodation, employment levels in public administration, and an end to poorly documented war crimes prosecutions.

¶2. (U) Croatian President Stipe Mesic received a warm welcome for his speech affirming that every Croatian citizen's rights should be protected, and that among those rights is the right to express and maintain one's ethnic identity. In comments clearly, although only implicitly, directed at the on-going tug of war over forming a government in Belgrade, Mesic insisted that integration into the EU should be a top priority for every government in the region, as it was through European unification that the ethnic battles of the past could be overcome. PM Sanader's government was represented by FM Goran Jandrokovic who, although less warmly received than Mesic, was given polite applause for his speech detailing steps the HDZ-led government had taken to realize Croatian Serbs' rights, including appointment of a Croatian Serb politician as Deputy Prime Minister, increasing provision of housing to returning Serb refugees, and progressive implementation of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities.

¶3. (SBU) Pupovac, however, had invited other guests to the event as well. Serbian President Tadic declined to attend at the last minute, after Serbian FM Jeremic and Croatian FM Jandrokovic's exchange of words a few days earlier during the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative meeting (REFTEL). Republika Srpska PM Milan Dodik did attend, and delivered a somewhat dyspeptic talk, commenting ironically that if Croatians thought multiethnic integration was such a great idea, then why had they fought so hard to dismantle Yugoslavia, adding that Serbs had been victims of the war throughout the former Yugoslavia, and saying that any Croatian Serb who felt disadvantaged in Croatia would be welcome in the RS. His off-stage comments to the press that Croatia had carried out the largest ethnic cleansing in Europe since WWII and that thousands of displaced Serbs ought to be suing Croatia, rather than Croatia suing Serbia at the International Court

of Justice, drew the most heated response, however, and set off a renewed round of rhetoric just as the Jeremic-Jandrokovic exchange was dying down. Croatian politicians from Mesic and Sanader on down have replied that Dodik should recall that Serbia under Milosevic began the war in the 1990's, and that it would be better to invite Croats and Muslims displaced from the RS during the war to return, than to offer protection to Croatia's Serbs.

14. (C) COMMENT: As Croatia's Assistant Foreign Minister Pjer Simunovic observed to POLOFF and visiting Ambassador for War Crimes Williamson on June 2, the continuing political tension in Serbia is not only straining bilateral relations between Serbia and countries such as Croatia which have recognized Kosovo. It is also straining any regional cooperation within the multilateral context, with even technical discussions risking a descent into polemics. In that regard, any attempt to regionalize or internationalize the status of Croatia's Serbs is likely to be counter-productive, overshadowing any discussion of Croatian Serbs' concerns about housing or employment with largely irrelevant arguments about Kosovo or genocide. Pupovac yearns for recognition as a regional Serbian leader, and has some useful lessons to share with leaders of Serb communities in neighboring states, but he at times risks sacrificing his domestic constituents' interests in exchange for international prominence. While he now laments that Croatian Serbs have had to get used to "larger political arguments breaking out over our heads," he brought at least this latest round of suffering on himself by having invited Tadic and Dodik to the event in the first place. END COMMENT.
Bradtke